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AUTHOR Newman, Michele O.
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ABSTRACT

The offering of a college course in French for industry and the professions revealed how well a business language course can serve the needs of language majors. The course served students in international marketing, management, finance, and a variety of liberal arts majors, including some language majors needing additional credits for graduation. Since language for business is essentially language training, it is as likely to improve fluency and familiarity with structures, idioms, vocabulary, and cultural context as a conversation or literature course would be. The oral skills developed are appropriate to many situations, and the social exchanges practiced are often more innovative than those in regular language courses. The materials used offer information about varied business situations and opportunities for developing all language skills, including skills in everyday letter-writing and communication. Materials having a commercial context can also provide much cultural information. Through such a course the liberal arts and the business student can each gain a greater appreciation of previously unexplored areas of knowledge. (MSE)

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BUSINESS FRENCH AND THE LIBERAL ARTS: A CREATIVE SYMBIOSIS

by

Michèle O. Newman
Pace University

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Michèle O. Newman
Pace University

BUSINESS FRENCH AND THE LIBERAL ARTS: A CREATIVE SYMBIOSIS

I am honored to have been invited here to share with you some of the experiences I am encountering while working on the development of a sequence of two courses in Business French. Like many amongst you now teaching the languages for business, my previous experience was strictly literary.However, a renewed interest in foreign languages has brought forward a myriad articles and reports aimed at motivating and urging the language teachers to review their objectives and design programs with broadened perspectives, and a better chance to provide our future graduates with a more relevant product, a marketable expertise.

I was very fortunate a few years back to meet two dynamic pioneers of the field Languages for Business, Brigitte Mueller and Claude Le Goff, at a workshop of AATF, in November 1982. I was then barely into the first draft of my Ph. D. thesis, and concerned with the fact that neither Diderot nor Mme de Staël were going to provide me with much material for my French classes. The workshop inspired me. Encouraged by the interest manifested by colleagues from International Marketing and International Management , I started to examine the needs of our large business student population on campus, and could not wait to start the recycling of my Liberal Arts training. In 1984, three weeks after my defense, The Ecole Supérieure de Lyon, in a superb environment, provided a total immersion in the world of business. As a M. Gharmilli was dramatically unraveling the mysteries of cost accounting, as I was watching a film of the plant manufacturing bottles for beer or Perrier, as elegant Maître Audrey Ducroux spoke about business

law, I felt first submerged, then challenged but fascinated. It did seem possible after all to commercialize a liberal arts major. The challenge of "Jeu Creator", led by gourmet expert M. Fournier, a game in which you are realistically assessing the possibilities of success in a business venture, based upon a hand of cards that spell out the facts, was so enlightening that it forced me to reflect upon the naiveté with which, one fine summer, I lost two thousand precious dollars, opening an art gallery in a very posh neighboring little town. I am living proof of the blunders Liberal Arts without business acumen can commit. If quite late in life I could find my awareness of things enhanced by an exposure to another mind exercise, so can the much more malleable grey matter of our students.

Like Montaigne, I know best my own experience, so I hope you will accept this very humble sharing of my still limited adventure teaching the course French for Business with a less than homogeneous group. I suspect some of you might - like ourselves at Pace - run the risk of having upper level language courses cancelled because of low registration. If language majors can take the language for business course to fulfill their requirements, it might make the difference. It has for us. We started three years ago, and the course has run twice. Each time we had a combination of International Marketing, Management, and Finance majors, plus an assortment of Liberal Arts majors: last spring, an Education major teaching College Russian, a double major Lit/Com and French, a French/Japanese language major, a History major, and an Art major. This spring, as five graduating students needed the three credits, it was conducted as a tutorial, with one Education/French double major.

How does our course, entitled "French for Industry and the Professions", meet the academic goals and allows us to reach the level of expertise expected from French majors? Very well indeed. First it ensures that we address the

four skills. The student who may have been somewhat unhappy to find out that this was the only upper level course offered at a given moment, when his/her impending graduation made it mandatory, will soon become aware that academically nothing is lost. Because the language for business is primarily language, it is as valid as any sample from any other field of endeavor. Since business deals with reality, the sequences of transactions, interactions and presentations meant to effect the marketing, promoting and acquisition of any given product or service, are either written or spoken in acceptable, even desirable language. So we have no reason to assume it is less effective in reaching the objective of improved fluency and familiarity with structures, idioms, vocabulary, and cultural context. In fact this interlude may well be an eye opener. The students realize that the situations explored in the text are VERY REAL ones. They meet real people in the act of performing the daily tasks encountered while earning a living. The dialogues are not a series of business equations: through them we are dealing with social graces, polite formulas, and desirable behavior in a crosscultural context. The oral skills can be very well developed as we witness, listen to, and try to emulate a business school graduate during his first interview with his/her future boss, or at a luncheon with a regional manager. It's a challenging exercise in conversation to imagine that you are Paul Jones, a young American opening a bank account in Paris, where he is just starting an internship, and to imitate him as he embarks on a lengthy conversation with a "guichetière" (teller) whom he invites for a drink immediately. It is certainly more innovative than many of the usual exchanges taking place between students discussing their courses or the local restaurants. A dimension of"credibility" is built in. Students of all disciplines enjoy projecting and start to visualize a future beyond term papers and tests: we cross the barrier from perhaps irrelevant to essential.

Pedagogically speaking, the range covered in the three texts I have either used or am considered for future adoption - Fontenille's Vie des Affaires, Danilo's Français Commercial, and the newly published book by Claude Le Goff, French for Business/ le Français des Affaires, all follow in detail a particular experience, a career, a business venture, and thus provide an excellent opportunity for the student to familiarize himself with vocabulary from all sectors of the world of business. As we somehow follow a case story, a person on a new job, a "stagiaire" abroad, or the owner of a P.M.E. (small firm), the language acquisition takes place through a great diversity of business situations, involving a great many characters.

An interesting side effect of conversational role-playing in the business context is a diminished self-consciousness. Those who feel restricted by a reluctance to reveal themselves will be less inhibited in a make-believe situation that lets them act out some of the dreams they are working for. Listening and speaking skills can be effectively enhanced for ALL language students by this course: from the conversation behind the mask to a more relaxed approach to communication of any type, there is but a short step. Motivation is reinforced by the added dimension of a product, the language, that can be recycled next year, on the job. The language learner never loses sight of the crucial necessity to be clear, accurate and understood if he knows he is transmitting an order that translates in terms of dollars - francs - and if it involves his commission. Perhaps the culture shock usually awaiting the students after graduation will be lessened by the fact that they have play-acted, evaluated, sometimes been puzzled by problems and dilemnas arising "pour de vrai" - for real - in the day of a career woman, or a "cadre" (executive), all while Jean-Paul works for the French Nabisco, or when Pulverix new CEO faces the necessity to expand, modernize both

plant and management, and urge dad's old associate to retire!

Reading and writing skills can be secured, polished, and fully developed as well by a summary of an article from the "Nouvel Economiste" as by exercises based on the excerpts found in some of our literay anthologies. As a matter of fact, the very objective, factual way things are related, ideas are described, and projects proposed, might seem less overwhelming, less impossible to emulate than some of the beautiful prose usually chosen for those anthologies. Quite a few precise examples come to my mind: in an intermediate texbook, the description of the butcher's shop, as seen through the imagination of young Colette baffled the students. It did not seem possible to compare veal kidneys to brown fruit nestled in quilted cotton, nor to marvel upon the irridescent play of light on the beef lungs happily swinging in the breeze from their meat hooks, comparing the texture to some flower petals - begonias to be exact! At 9:15 in the morning these images made them queasy. I suspect even the French majors could enjoy a more sedate approach to refining their writing skills.

The basic exercise in writing for this course has traditionnally been the business letter, so dependent on grammatical correction that it will urge all students to review the rules of agreement, the conjugations, the necessary subjunctive, the conditional used in many polite formulas. The idea that we are showing our expertise to our business correspondants - "noblesse oblige" - will prod the student to check more carefully than he might do on the letter to peers or family from the traditional approach: money and success are involved in presentations. Press releases, memos to superiors, reports to various departments of a firm, and all variations on business communications rely on verbal accuracy and precision of thought.

Some of the very fine articles from the Nouvel Economiste originally

chosen for the benefit of the Business students offered me the opportunity to point out idioms galore, grammatical structures seemingly out of the common - and yet so often used in spoken French. A very polished expository prose in those articles not only does not rely too much on rarely used tenses, but nevertheless brings to the classroom those metaphors grasped with ease by the students' French counterparts. We are not quite dealing with the typical surrealist image found in Sartre's La Nausée (Nausea). In fact we are dealing with ways of expressing thoughts that rely on images related to contemporary French culture, daily life and changing values. We are learning French by living through their press the problems that the French are facing now.

Yes of course... Balzac did innundate us with tales of business successes and failures, and introduced us to characters whose cynicism and obsessions are still quite relevant to this day, but to teach French culture to our French majors just by the past would be limited. The calculating machine of Pascal is as far removed from today's computer as the 19th century's speculations are from the techniques and goals of today's PDG's (CEO) and Cadres (upper level executives), let alone electronics and High Tech trailblazers.

So... I enjoyed explaining the warlike vocabulary of a little article whose title might be in French "The demise of the sweater", or perhaps the "routing" of the sweater. In it we learned about the black market of the knitting industry: it was funny to visualize fifteen million sweaters traveling all over Europe with a label saying "made in Italy", an Italy they never saw, knitted of recycled garbage. There was a sense of the epic that led us to evoke the Chanson de Roland, as it brought into our minds "the multicolored batalions of sweaters marching in perfect order". When the author of the article ushered in the "mastodonts" of heavy artillery, no

doubt the large firms crushing the little footmen, we were experiencing first hand the literary device commonly known as parody. The point is that we find in the publications traditionally used to enhance the Business language courses an untapped source of relevant material that lends itself marvelously to the job at hand - that is to sensitize the student to the precision and subtleties of expression usually associated with literary text analysis. I have xeroxed for the class several articles of the type of the sweater market story, and it has provided an informal way to probe into idiomatic French as it takes its roots in Culture - with a big "C" or a little "c". An article on Castorama - a chain of stores we might call handyman's heaven - was the occasion of a reference to "le castor", nickname of Simone de Beauvoir. And so on... So far each article has been a treasure box to bring into focus real French life. Why not these articles rather than the very sad story of the young father who sets out to go and drown his severely handicapped little son, a story to be found in the section meant to illustrate family life of one of our better literary anthologies? Trade magazines bring us to discuss the new approach to saturday shopping as a family outing, as well as marketing strategies, product packaging and displays, and publicity ads.

The unexpected bonus is that we are killing two birds with one stone, perhaps even more than two birds, since from the linguistic dimension we go not only to the commercial but also to the cultural. A solid awareness of the changing values and goals of the new generation emerge from trade publications. From the linguistic and cultural components, we go one step further. We approach the crucial concept of GLOBAL awareness, quite hard to come across in most conventional texts, and in the age of the multinationals it is a major area of concern. In an interesting article of the "French Review" of February 1984, Sanford Dugan mentions a survey that reveals that Foreign

Language majors are low on a scale when measured against Math., Science, and Social Sciences majors in their global knowledge of world issues. Surely this French major who, in his/her upper level FRE 215 or FRE 216 will have been asked to regularly consult the copies of "L'Expansion" made available to them at our library, and to report orally to the class, or to write a report using it as a source, will have seen the eye-catching layouts, the colourful diagrams dealing with the relationships or comparisons between all countries, from every continent, maps of the francophone countries in their relations with the rest of the world, statistics that stress the balance of power, the precarious equilibrium of a forever changing political design.

The role of the Foreign Language teacher as primordial in developing global awareness is explored in depth by a team of writers in a 1981 Northeast Conference Report. The list of the factors that had in the past inhibited educators is enlightening: by telling you what not to do, the authors point out the way towards an emphasis on the notion of interdepency, acceptance of others' traditions, the need for changing curricula, and increased flexibility, plus the appeal and impact of authentic material and realia - all this a characteristic of the Business Language course. Such courses give the instructor the opportunity to develop within the group a vivid interest for those countries outside the hexagon, and to explore the ties with the old metropole, as well as their connections with the rest of the world: the students this year have prepared reports on the marketing and management of the multinationals in the third world.

An objection may be raised in terms of goals: because of having accepted other majors, are we washing down the business component of the course? We do not think so. Since self-motivation is no doubt the only way to Foreign language acquisition - outside of God and mothers - it is well understood

that the business students will do ALL the assignments the course demands. The non-business majors were allowed certain substitutions: they did all the work from the texts we used, as it provided structured grammar and conversational skills reinforcement. But for their creative compositions and the two oral reports built into the syllabus, they were allowed to pick subjects either either from their field of expertise, or from broader topics pertaining to current events. The "Journal Français d"Amérique" was a favorite.

This bring me to my last point: the very positive aspect offered by the venture. A sampling of the group's topics ranged from an enthusiastic description of Van Gogh's major works with slides, a report on the tunnel sous la Manche - under the Channel tunnel- by the Ed. major, a book review on Madame Bovary, an African safari travel report, to name just a few. The topics can be on the psychology of management, a detailed analysis of a publicity campaign, or the assessment of the aesthetic qualities of French ads.

In a world where the demands of technological expertise leave little time to pursue Liberal Arts interests, the B.B.A. candidates were privileged to hear about something beyond their field. Bridges were built between groups whose paths never cross during the last two years of College.

The Liberal Arts student, who has the tendency to belittle the "intellectual" aspect of business studies will discover the high level of sophistication of the material to be absorbed by his counterpart, whon he often thought of as less "enlightened" , as oral assignments encouraged the students to share the knowledge acquired in their business courses. A very humbling experience that shows that all intellectuals need not be philosophers, or writers. The business student, cutting his way through jungles of formulas, figures and statistics, with no other machete than long hours of study, and prone to think that success or failure is mostly a matter of numbers, six

figures income, and power, will become aware of some compensations in store for him. I'll have to admit to a funny case - a while back, in a French lit. course - when a business student after reading "The Confessions" switched to landscape architecture, telling me Jean-Jacques Rousseau had done it for him.

Club Med, despite the ad, may not be the only antidote for civilisation. Perhaps civilisation is the antidote for a pervasive organisational environment. Those who can relate to a Colette short story, a George Brassens message, a Goscinny-Sempé or Jacques Faisant cartoon, Astérix, a French film, or a beautiful Yourcenar oriental tale, and so on, will find themselves on the road to a lower blood pressure, and richer inner life. In a curriculum so stringent it leaves few - if any - electives, the business student will find the opportunity to enjoy at least a few facets of imagination and creativity. For him/her, the chance to escape from the reality of work into any Liberal Arts discipline is as important as it is for the Liberal Arts major to see what is doing in the business world. Last Friday. may 1st , the Wall Street Journal reveals that business men's severest complain against business reporters was their lack of business knowledge.

Last but not least: culture is a concept that is forever changing its components. The development of a country - be it France, Spain, a South American nation, an African territory, Japan or Australia, is crucially altered by its economic and industrial evolution. The business publications bring this knowledge. A French major must know why the cliché so often photographed until recently of the chubby man on the bike, béret on head, and baguette under his arm is totally anachronistic. France is no more only the land of cheese, wine and the cathedrals, but the land of the T.G.V., Ariane, the Concorde, and a remarkable nuclear expertise - as yesterday's workshop brilliantly illustrated . But then, Claude Simon, a French writer has just

won the Nobel prize! So, the coin still has two sides. To quote Montaigne again, as "everyman carries within himself the entire form of human nature", so do all samples of a language lead to the knowledge of a country, of a people, of a culture, if we look hard enough, and deep enough.

Michele.O. Newman
Pace University
Pleasantville, N.Y. 10570

Business French & the Liberal Arts

List of helpful documents

1.- "French For Business And International Trade", edited by David O'Connell last issue particular informative. Spring 1987. Vol. III, No.1

2.- A.D.F.L. Bulletins - most issues contain a report on Business Language. for instance: January 1986: William J. Carney. "Integrating French into the traditional Foreign Language Curriculum: a marriage of convenience that works." - January 1987: 3 reports.

3.- NORTHEAST CONFERENCE REPORTS: the various issues do cover a broad range of articles on cooperation and collaboration betwee the disciplines. Your chairpersons may have them on hand.

4.- Extra books.(excerpts xeroxed to be handed out)

1. Brémond, J. et Geledan, A. Dictionnaire économique et social. Paris Hatier, 1981.
2. Bernard, Y. et Colli, J.C. Vocabulaire économique et financier. Paris. Editions du Seuil, 1976.
3. L'Economie de A. a Z. "Les Echos" jan.11, 1980- may 29, 1981. Paris Ramsay, 1982.

5.- MAGAZINES from France - collected on last day of languages conferences' when exhibitors are generous. (Continental Book Co. - MLA dec 1986)

1. Direction et Gestion des entreprises. 1986 No.1
2. BANQUE. Octobre 1986. No.465
3. Le conseiller du COMMERCE EXTERIEUR. Sept/Oct. 1986
4. Afrique Industrie. 1er Octobre 1986.
5. MICRO SYSTEMS. Oct. 1986 (informatique)
6. Mondes en développement.
7. Jeune Afrique Magazine.

(to name just a few. Helpful to get students interested in authentic material)

AND SO ON... I am sure you all have such a list, and I will be happy to hear your suggestions. Thank you.

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